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GOLLANCZ

THE LIMITS OF ASSIMILATION

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THE

LIMITS OF ASSIMILATION.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

BAYSWATER SYNAGOGUE,

ON ROSH-HASHANA (NEW YEAR),

OCTOBER 4TH, 5671—1910,

BY

THE REV. PROFESSOR HERMANN GOLLANCZ,

M.A., D.LIT., RABBI.

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THE LIMITS OF ASSIMILATION

DEAR CONGREGANTS!—While on the Continent in the course of my summer holiday, an English newspaper of considerable repute and circulation fell into my hands, and my eyes lighted upon an article dealing with Jewish matters, written beyond doubt by a co-religionist.

I scarcely knew whether to be amused or angry at the remarks therein contained: but it occurred to me that if, at the time, I could not or did not feel inclined to write on the subject, I might at least bring some of the points there adduced under the notice of my Congregation, in order most vigorously to disclaim statements which in the main are unwarrantable, and at the same time to sound a note of warning to those who listen to me.

It is sad to reflect that a Jewish writer when

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he has the privilege to contribute to a highly-important non-Jewish organ, should not be able to speak from an objective point of view, but should introduce, nay, obtrude to the full his own personal point of view, or his personal wish in the matter, and thus mislead those readers who think they are listening to an authoritative presentation of the facts.

Brothers and sisters, I laid up those statements in my memory, and I think there can scarcely be a more appropriate occasion on which to place them before you than this New Year's Day, on which, I take it, that as Jews, whatever other message it may bring to us, it is implied that we wish to renew our Judaism with the New Year, to fix its duties upon our minds not for this day alone, but for the coming year, aye, for the years that, with God's help, may yet be in store for us; so that by a renewal of our sense of obligation towards our time-honoured religion, we may strengthen it in our own hearts and in the hearts of our children.

The citizens of the land in which we live are told by this newspaper correspondent that "it is interesting to note how rapid and complete is

the assimilation of many English Jews. There is so little in these days to distinguish them from their fellow-citizens."

Alas, dear friends, the assimilation, even as far as it goes, is certainly too "rapid" for us; but to say that in the case of *many* English Jews the assimilation is "complete" is, indeed, going much too far.

"Many" is a relative term, and I doubt whether, regarding the Jewish population in these isles, it is right to remark that the assimilation of *a large proportion* of English Jews is "complete."

How frequently have I myself (and I am sure my predecessor in office must have done the same) denounced this undue assimilation which is going on in our community—assimilation to the habits and methods of the surrounding people—an old evil among the Hebrews, dating back to the very early chapters of our history as a people.

We are told that "complete religious toleration has done most" to bring about this state of things. Then all I can say is, if in the attempt to obtain "complete religious toleration" we have lost, or wilfully thrown away, our Judaism, it is a thousand pities that we ever obtained it here; or, at

all events, a thousand pities that members of our race should be so ungrateful and rebellious as to exchange the gift of religious freedom for a grovelling servility, for the slavish following of the customs of those of our neighbours in the land, who themselves throw off the yoke of their own religious up-bringing.

How valuable that "civil and political freedom," that "complete religious toleration," that induces you after a generation or two to kick away the ladder by which, after much struggle and suffering, you obtained your franchise as a citizen of this country—your franchise as a child of Heaven!

It is painfully amusing to be informed that "there are still the old-world customs of an Oriental people, but, generally speaking, there is little in the life of the English Jew to distinguish him from his fellow of other creeds." So much the worse, if it were true. But the statement is audacious when applied to the general community of English Jews. I would use the words with which the writer continues, but in a different sense: "Perhaps this is never more apparent than at this holiday season of the year."

He meant the summer holiday. But I would employ them to refer to this holy day and this holy season of the Jewish year. A goodly company of English Jews still adopt "the old-world customs of an Oriental people" on New Year's Day, on the Day of Kippur, on Tabernacles, on the other Feasts and Fasts, both in their homes and when they are away from home. And I take it, that the proportion of this number that are not strictly observant Jews would not wish to dissociate themselves from these old-world customs of an Oriental people, and that they feel it a privilege to participate in the religious ceremonies and observances practised by their forefathers, even though these may now be shorn of some of the exaggerated features of old, and brought somewhat more into harmony with present-day methods.

We have no objection (using the writer's words) to "many languidly passing vacation-days on the parades of well-known seaside resorts," or to "larger numbers every year taking their recreation in the form of golf, fishing, yachting, motoring, and shooting."

But on these conditions :—On the one hand, that they do not by their demeanour and conduct bring

discredit upon the Jewish name, and on the other hand, that the principles and traditions of Judaism be not sacrificed by them in the desire to indulge in every form of sport practised by their fellow-citizens.

Nay, I go further and say, that there is nowadays no absolute necessity for the Jewish young man or woman, or for the adult Jew, in the pursuit of his pleasures or recreations, to violate the observances of Judaism, unless he or she wishes to do so.

The writer of the article, as if recognising the process of cause and effect in the present condition of Anglo-Jewry, next turns his attention to the Jewish Religious Union, on the establishment of which he cannot bestow sufficient praise. But when he proceeds: "The establishment of the Union was hailed with delight by a large section of London Jewry"—well, unless I have been asleep in the interval, I can only characterise such an assertion as anything but accurate. I might, indeed, use a stronger expression.

"Hailed with delight by *a large section*." If the writer wishes to deceive himself, or the promoters wish to deceive themselves in the matter, it is their business, but we certainly have some idea as to the true condition of things.

"The Synagogue, always the centre of Jewish life," we are told, "was losing its hold." Unfortunately but too true; but we fail to see how the new movement will bring it back to its own.

Regeneration must come from within, by judicious management, by progressive methods, by preserving our conservatism amid liberal applications, even by a not too "rigorous insistence on the letter of the law" in matters of unessential importance, to determine which should be the exclusive duty and right of the clergy once entrusted with their charge. And just the weak point in the formation of the Congregation on "Liberal" Jewish lines, as depicted by the writer of the article, is "the establishment of religious services *supplementary* to those provided by the existing Synagogues."

We do not want *supplementary services;* our ordinary services should be sufficient in themselves, and if they are not, they should be rendered sufficient; they should be made to suffice as regards the spiritual needs of every earnest worshipper.

We do not want *supplementary services*, I repeat; the very suggestion is a condemnation of existing

conditions: and if these conditions are open to improvement, then the improvement, I contend, should come from within; and you will never improve the general condition of the Synagogue Service throughout Anglo-Jewry and of Judaism itself by adding another limb, weak or strong, to the body corporate of English Jews.

On the contrary, such action will spell not strength but weakness, will be not helpful and supplementary but a source of distraction and dissension; not the union which in the past bound all Jews together for the preservation and glorification of a common Faith; not the united front which such seasons of the Jewish year as the present could demonstrate among Jews in the various continents the world over, but the beginning of a disruption among the communities here, the signal for sects and schisms, such as we are told existed in the ancient city of Jerusalem before the hand of the enemy was able to lay it low.

Heaven guard us from such a *dénouement!*

But now, although the condition of things in the religious life of Anglo-Jewry, as portrayed in the article in question, is far from accurate, nay, is misleading when taken in a general sense—and the

forecast is, I venture to hope, too pessimistic, while the remedial measures for the preservation of English Judaism tacitly recommended to be found in the Union on lines of "Liberal Judaism" is almost ludicrous: yet, there is a substratum of truth worthy of consideration and reflection underlying the statements put forth regarding what I have before now termed the anæmic condition of Anglo-Jewry, more especially on its religious side.

Let us to-day give a willing ear to what is being said, and let us take the lessons to heart. Let us sum up the situation.

There is undoubtedly too much *assimilation* of the wrong sort going on in our midst.

The Jew and Christian should mix in the world, but the Jew should know the border-line beyond which he should not go.

There is much that the Jew may learn from his non-Jewish neighbour, but it should not be at the price of religious obedience and observance. If the Jew can learn from his fellow-citizen how to respect authority in religion, how to conduct himself with greater reverence in the House of God, and similar lessons, then by all means let the Jew assimilate

these qualities of the non-Jew, and his Judaism will not suffer; on the contrary, it will become strengthened, it will become more Jewish, not less Jewish.

We often become wiser and better in this fashion; for it is well known in common life that the lessons which we ignore when taught by those near to us are more readily appreciated and learnt by us when put forward by strangers.

But, dear brothers and sisters, as regards the essential demands of our religious code, let me warn you on this New Year's Day not to assimilate yourselves to such a degree with your surroundings as to bring you and your own within the danger-zone of ultra-assimilation, which will leave to you and to your children no trace whatsoever of your ancient Faith and its beautiful traditions, once your envied heritage.

Do not be of those who act upon the principle:

בערתי הקודיש מן הביה

"I have banished everything sacred from my house: I do not believe in traditions that divide me from my fellow-man; such things may have

had some holiness for my fathers, but times have changed, and my ideas on such subjects have changed too!"

I exhort you, do not give a handle to the statement that "there is little in the life of the English Jew to distinguish him from his fellow of other creeds."

This may be true as regards the cut of his coat or the shape of his beard, or the manner and method of his indoor amusements and outdoor games.

Thank Heaven, there are still many among English Jews, or, if you will Jews in England, who may be distinguished from their fellow-citizens in other respects also—on the side of their race and religion. The outlook is not quite so pessimistic. Only see to it, dear friends, that you and your children preserve this distinctive badge; suffer not yourselves to be cut adrift from the general body of Jews and to lose your individuality as Jews, to be submerged in the general population of the world.

Do not answer: "I am a Jew by race, and this I never deny." You could not, if you wished. This is a fact that must stand for all time.

Born a Jew, or descended from Jews, no power in the world can alter the fact.

Besides, if you wish to conceal it, the higher your position, the more difficult the task. There will always be some curious historical investigator to publish to the world the interesting, though perhaps vexatious, intelligence of Lord So and So's, or Sir So and So's, Jewish connexion or descent.

No, if you wish to be known as Jews, and to feel it an honour to belong to this ancient Brotherhood, a sense of *religious* obligation must be super-added to that of mere racial connexion.

Your homes must be those of Jews—dedicated to Jewish thought and feeling—devoted to Jewish ceremonial, discharged in a rational and impressive manner; homes in which the observances identified with the olden religion of our ancestors may be witnessed by your children, even though they may have a somewhat modern setting.

Who will not agree with the words spoken at the Church Congress a week ago by the Bishop of Ripon? "We need a greater reverence for home and home-life. . . . On the side of pleasure we

ought to introduce a more fastidious and elevated taste, checking the passionate love of continual excitement which seeks sensational enjoyment outside the home.

"The home is the unit of national life. It is out of pure homes, ruled in rectitude, honor, and unselfish love, that will come the men apt and fit to sustain the honor of England, to frame her laws, and to vindicate the reality and to manifest the persistency of her Christianity, and enable her to fulfil her destiny in the world."

Substitute, in this last sentence, the term "Judaism" for the terms "England" and "Christianity," and you have the truth of the whole matter as regards our fate as Jews. See to the *home*, for out of it come the issues of the continued life of the Jew.

But see also to the condition of that other home —the House of Prayer, the Synagogue. Remedy its defects and blemishes. We are told they exist, and that is sufficient, whether we believe it or like it. There are people who never will make the attempt to see eye to eye with others; perhaps they cannot.

But given the truth that the Synagogue Service

can be improved in certain directions conformably with Jewish Law, and even with modern ecclesiastical authority, let us face the problem boldly and honestly; let us not drive away our young men and women of the rising generation; let us not wait to be taunted again and again with the reproach: "The Synagogue is losing its hold; its services are uninteresting"; and that, practically speaking, there is nothing left for English Jewry but to throw itself into the arms of the Union of Liberal Judaism, if it wishes to save its Synagogue Service.

The Union, the aims of which, in its latest developments, are directed against the very principles and foundation of our creed!

No, brethren, let us ourselves save the Service and the Synagogue; and if it be necessary, even at some little sacrifice; let us keep our children and our children's children attached to us by our own methods, and by our own religious force, if we believe that we possess any religious force.

But, dear friends, with all the gravity possible I say it, there is a form of Union that we do require. Heaven guard us, I repeat, from the

dangers of communal dissension! We require all the strength and support we can marshal for the administration of our Synagoges, for the upholding and development of our Charities, for the improvement of our educational work. Let us stand shoulder to shoulder among ourselves and with our neighbours in the land in the great fight which is constantly being waged against Poverty, against Ignorance and Vice, against Disease and Suffering; and let us not fritter away our energies over trifling differences in matters of ritual or religion, in wrangling over metaphysical doctrines which belong to the realm of the Unknown, aye, the Unknowable.

Let us, with the New Year, determine to unite our forces, great and small, strong and weak, to produce in the coming time a healthier Judaism than is known to the present generation, and to us will be the satisfaction and the strength, unto Judaism will be the honor, and the glory will be the Lord's, unto Him, the Creator of man and his Judge.

May He judge us this day and every day in mercy and in love! Amen!

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